

Voices of Protest Oral History Collection (EVOP)

Deborah Espinosa, Chicana activist

Interviewed July 24, 2008

**Interview done by
Catherine B. Magel**

Interviewer: Good morning, this is Deborah Espinosa; I'm interviewing her on July 24th 2008. The interview is being held at El Pueblo History Museum located at 301 N Union in Pueblo, CO. The interview is sponsored by the CSU-Pueblo University Archives and Special Collections and is part of the Southern Colorado Ethnic Heritage and Diversity project. I wanted to confirm that Ms. Espinosa understands that this interview is being recorded and that this recording will be preserved at the CSU-Pueblo University archives.

D.E: Yes, I understand.

Interviewer: Thank you so very much for giving me your time. Now we shall begin with your questions. First of all, would you please tell me your name?

D.E: I'm Deborah Espinosa. My maiden name was Mora.

Interviewer: I know you're residing now in Pueblo, but would you tell your origination?

D.E: Yes, I grew up in Grand Junction. I was actually born in Gunnison, CO, because my family worked the timber and railroading there, and we came to Pueblo in 1975.

Interviewer: Why do you think you had to protest?

D.E: Well...

Interviewer: Before we go into that, I know you gave us a little talk in class about how you grew up and how when you came to Pueblo, how you really liked it because you were able to see some Mexican-American things like the dances and the food.

D.E: Right.

Interviewer: Could you tell me a little bit about your feelings at that time once again for the recording?

D.E: Sure. I grew up in Grand Junction, which was, at that time was a much smaller town. But they were really, and I think still, it's a town void of its ethnic culture. They don't seem to appreciate it or recognize it. I hope that's changing now, especially since they have Mesa State there, but at the time, Mexican students were few in number and we weren't really encouraged to continue our education. I gave some examples of that in class yesterday so I'm not...

Interviewer: Would you state them again? I'd like to hear them again.

D.E: Ok.

Interviewer: Especially the one where you said, 'Why are we saying we're Spanish?' Didn't you say that?

D.E: Well I said that to my mother.

Interviewer: Say that again for us.

D.E: Ok. It all goes back to 'why do you protest?' So when you examine your life, and when you really don't know who you are, and when you have conversations with your own mother, I asked her, 'why do we call ourselves Spanish? Aren't we Mexican?' She tried to explain it to me the best she could. But people called themselves Spanish because that's preferable to Mexican and Indian, let's be quite frank. Even though she tried to interpret some of the history, it was based on her interpretation of the family history is that we were more Spanish. I find that not to be the truth at all as most families that are long residents of the Southwest. But I always felt that the color of my skin identified me. And people treat you a certain way on that basis. So, I identified with Mexican more than Spanish. Those are the kinds of conversations, and examinations that I would have with her and with myself about who I am. I didn't know who I was because I was never told, and really had to go through a whole long and awareness as we all did, to find out that we were really Indian and Spanish and therefore we are Mexican. But it's never told to us; we didn't understand it. My own mother didn't understand it in that we are the victims or the result of colonization. When you remove what's history, what's primary language, religion, et cetera, you are a colonized people, and that is what has happened to the Chicanos of the South West.

So why did we protest? Let me count the ways. First of all, we needed to change the educational system. We needed to say we needed bilingual education. We needed Chicano studies, the ethnic studies, so that our children, and everyone, not just the Chicano population but other people would understand and be sensitive to our history, our experience, and allow us into the mainstream so that we could compete, because we had been held back for so long.

And then there are many other reasons to protest. We worked on police brutality issues. We worked on educational issues, as I said, but the boycotts of that time...we were understanding how powerful they could be. So we protested lots of things. It could be protesting a particular individual, a legislator, or an event, so we were always very busy, because there were so many issues and causes. But we protested because we wanted to improve things for our people. That's why we protested. As organizers, one of the ways to get the attention of the media, to get the attention of the community, is to protest. And it is an American right, but too often protesters are treated very, very poorly.

Interviewer: That's true. I was quite aware of that when I was protesting in Oklahoma, but I know protests were not as organized as yours. That's the other thing I wanted you to discuss. You mentioned your husband. You were already married when you were up in Boulder, right? Would you tell me a little bit about your student life, and your mother, as a mother, and all these things that you were? We were so impressed when you talked about that, because one student did readily say that, 'and you were a student too?' Remember that question?

D.E: Yes, yes, yes.

Interviewer: That was so mystifying to us all. We could barely get through our classes without being out there protesting and handing out information like you did, your group. My one question I had was, did you protest as an individual, did you protest as a group? Well, I know that you were in a group, but...

D.E: I also protested as an individual, because within the larger Chicano movement was also the Chicana movement, and I tried to organize some of the women on campus.

Interviewer: What were your goals in that organization?

D.E: Well, well...

Interviewer: Or what was your motive?

D.E: My motive for that was recognizing that there were women on campus, like myself, who were learning and becoming more aware and educated. But at the same time, there were a lot of male students who had wives at home who were not being educated and brought into the circle and even though they were very supportive and largely aware of the Chicano movement, they didn't have a role within the movement. I was trying to bridge that so I tried to have some meetings with women. I have to tell you, it did not go well with some of the men. They did not really care for that. Some mockingly called me the 'Cesar Chavez' of the Chicana movement, and so it didn't go well. I also didn't have the tools and the support to carry that forward. As Chicanas, we are still trying to identify ourselves, and our roles, within that movement. We really were under a sense of machismo, if you will, because the first leaders were male leaders. That's not the case anymore; there are many female leaders within the movement, who are still working at professional jobs, who also work on issues and they're very, very respected now.

Interviewer: Can you tell me some of those people?

D.E: Shirley Otero, from Grand Junction, originally from the San Luis Valley, was, is a very strong leader in education, but primarily she really led her gente (people) there on land rights issues in the valley. Priscilla Falcon, the baton was passed to her when she became a widow. Her husband was killed, you know, unexpectedly by a declared racist. She took on more of a leadership role by getting her education; she's now Dr. Falcon. So Priscilla is a very respected leader in the movement for all that she has done.

Interviewer: Even now.

D.E: Yes, because she's worked on international issues, as well, with her husband, her second husband. Rita Martinez is one that I consider a leader, working locally, who has carried through on protests and traditional events here in town without rest for over twenty years, maybe thirty years. So there are women, definitely, (indistinguishable).

Interviewer: Just a handful, we need more. But you and the rest are good examples.

D.E: Those are three examples of women that I respect quite a bit.

Interviewer: And they're local; I mean they're Colorado.

D.E: They're Colorado.

Interviewer: They're Colorado; that's great.

D.E: There are many leaders, but they were not associated with the Chicano movement, by my definition.

Interviewer: Which groups were you involved in, in the protest?

D.E: The United Farms Workers movement, the Anti War movement, those two come to mind. But then there are many local issues. We would often go to support other communities on their issues.

Interviewer: Are you still a protester?

D.E: Yes, yes.

Interviewer: Of course.

D.E: Right now, I don't physically protest because the repercussions would be too huge on this job, to be quite frank. And there are 501C3 things that we also have to consider, you know, as a nonprofit organization. But quite frankly, it has come down on me, from the community...

Interviewer: They want you to get out there, and be more vocal?

D.E.: Well, no, they want me to shut up.

Interviewer: Oh, shut up. I thought it would be the other way around.

D.E: Because I have been outspoken to a degree. As a historian I'm very concerned about how distorted and manipulated Christopher Columbus history is taught and the way it's celebrated, et cetera. When I have tried to do that, I've been muffled and affected financially at this institution.

Interviewer: That's too bad. Now what issues do you see in our locale, in Pueblo, in surrounding communities, for the Chicanos, other than the migrants, who are the illegals and the INS and all that? What is your focus on?

D.E: I'm really concerned about the drug situation, right now. As far as we've come, we've also done some sliding. When there's three generations of drug users in our community. Three, four generations of people on welfare, it becomes such an ingrained subculture, that we have to really deal with that and it's going to take an entire community to work on that. There's a lack of understanding, again, about our history. People don't see, oh, there's a mestizo, whose ancestors have struggled over generations. They see a punk, gangster and they don't like them; they hate him and they want him the hell out of their neighborhood.

Interviewer: We had a question in class, in discussion, 'what is poverty, and how does one get out of poverty?' So could you help us with that question because that was so debatable? A lot of my group

said, 'motivation,' but that's a really, really difficult question. But as you see it, with your experience, because education, how do get people out of that poverty rotation they're in?

D.E: I think poverty is certainly a lack of power. When you're poor, you cannot represent yourself. You're not an empowered person; you cannot represent yourself in the courts; you cannot get the health care you need; you cannot get the housing you need; you cannot get the education you need. So when you don't have access to that, that just starts to destruct, or take apart, your morale, who you are, your very fiber, so poverty can destroy your spirit. That's why entire people have been broken or held back. The American Indian, you know the indigenous people around the world are so held back by poverty that they don't have potable water; they don't have medicine for curable diseases. So when we talk about poverty, you have to talk about the extremes of poverty, and what is poor in this country may be different for another country, so our perceptions of poverty vary. But at the same time, more and more people in this country are beginning to identify with being poor because they don't have access to things anymore.

Interviewer: Especially in this time right now when everybody is still feeling it.

D.E: Especially in the time we are in now, so the pendulum may be shifting back to where we do see more protesting. Not necessarily in the streets, but more globally, because the planet is in peril and because we're connected by the web.

Interviewer: And also, you mentioned something about Iraq. Didn't you mention that? Something that we should be thinking about Iraq or the wars or?

D.E: I did. To bring it up now, it's a little bit out of context but because I talked about it, I was talking to the non-Hispanic students in the class, and I'm telling them that I was glad that they were taking the Chicano studies course, and that to always appreciate the history of individuals. And...

Interviewer: That's a great statement (muffled)

D.E: And to, not to be...

Interviewer: To be aware...

D.E: To be aware and to not be afraid of people that are different or that have different experiences. I gave the example, for instance, don't be afraid of language, because that's a colonization tool to take away the language, and this country is now working toward changing our constitution to make English the official language. That's unnecessary. It already is. We are speaking English right now. But it is a fearful tactic. I ask them to understand the broader [issues?] and to think critically, to examine the larger issues and the repercussions that this will have on people. I gave Iraq as an example. Are we there to help people or are we there for resources? Are we there to colonize another country to have control over another country?

Interviewer: The analytical thinking you told us about, what was your major when you were in your studies?

D.E: I majored in history and I had a minor in Chicano studies.

Interviewer: One of our students commented about she hopes to see Chicano studies as a major, and so all of the speakers in our class were emphasizing that we should really push for that.

D.E: Organize yourself as students. It is time consuming, but it is doable. Everyone has to evaluate how much they can give and how much they want to do. But, first of all, organize yourselves to do it.

Interviewer: In conclusion, Deborah Espinosa, would you like to give us your summary of your past experience and what you see for the future, the local, yourself, or anything you'd like to say about that.

D.E: Well...

Interviewer: Cause you have so much to talk about (muffled).

D.E: That's what makes it so difficult, is that there's so much material, or, or areas...

Interviewer: You're a leader now and this museum is a beautiful museum, and is wonderful for the community. I know you worked twenty years did you say?

D.E: I've been here twenty years.

Interviewer: Twenty years.

D.E: And, it certainly has had its challenges, you know. I've had, again, I'll repeat that....

Interviewer: And it's wonderful to see a Chicana woman in a position as you're in. That's a very good example for the rest of us.

D.E: Well, thank you very much. Remember that we were part of that first wave that went in to the colleges in the 60's and I'm very fortunate to have been part of that. I said yesterday, too, to the students, that we learned more than the text book; we were literally learning how to organize.

Interviewer: You were living it.

D.E: We were living it, and we went everywhere as much as we could as students to learn more. That really helped me in my career, it really did. To give you an example, I was recently approached by some coworkers who want to see me go in another direction and actually offered me some money for programs. I turned it down because I know where I want to go with this museum. And, recognizing when your being, or...

Interviewer: Baited...

D.E: Baited, learning how to negotiate, learning how to recognize certain situations. If I had not gone through those early experiences I don't think I would've had all of the strength that I have now to face the challenges that I face now.

Interviewer: Well that's a wonderful summation. Thank you for your time, and I'm sure the students will really enjoy listening to our conversation.

D.E: Well, I certainly don't want to sound like I know it all. I don't.

Interviewer: Oh you know a lot more than a lot of us.

D.E: I just have a lot of passion for it. I have a lot to learn yet.

Interviewer: And we have a lot to learn from you and I'm sure we are going to learn cause I heard you say you are going to help us organize. We want to have a really nice multi-cultural diversity center at the college, like maybe a whole building. That would be terrific.

D.E: Wouldn't that be incredible? Good luck.

Interviewer: I think we can do it.

D.E: Yeah, we can.

(Muffled)

Interviewer: In conclusion I want to thank Ms. Espinosa and I will conclude today's interview with this wonderful informational packet. Thank you very much Ms. Espinosa.

D.E: Thank you.